

De Contemptu Mundi: A Medieval Satire*

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I

Bernard of Cluny and His Times

Bernard's single up-gush of melody is a lamentation over the evil condition of the times in which he lives. They were indeed days to sadden the soul of the saint; and he called his poem *De Contemptu Mundi*; for he despised the *immundus mundus*—the foul world—in which he was forced to remain.

So writes S. W. Duffield of this satire, which is significant, not only for its own message, but also for the fact that it is a source of some present-day hymns.

In the twelfth century, the time of the great Crusades, we find the noblest and the purest of the Latin Hymns. This is the century of Hildebert, Abelard, Bernard of Clairvaux, Peter the Venerable, Bernard of Cluny, and Adam of St. Victor. Of these writers no one has inspired a deeper or more fervent desire for the heavenly country than has Bernard of Cluny in his poem, "On the Contempt of the World."

Very little is known about his life, but it is generally conceded that he was born at Morlaix in Brittany, of English parents. The date of his prominence is fixed from the fact that Peter the Venerable was his abbot, which places it between 1122 and 1156. The two men were intimate friends. Indeed, Bernard so greatly admired the Abbot that he dedicated to him his master-piece.

Not only was Bernard a contemporary of the great St. Bernard of Clairvaux but, by strange coincidence, the Cluniac was composing his poem at the same time that that saint was composing his equally well-known poem, *Jubilus rhythmicus de nomine Jesu*. Each in his cloistered cell was singing the glories of the celestial country.

Sheltered within the walls of Cluny at a time when its wealth, luxury, and magnificence are renowned, Bernard with a troubled heart looks forth upon a world of oppression, disease, poverty, unrest, degradation, and war. Day after day brooding in his cell he there pens his poem of 3,000 lines satirizing conditions as he sees them. The moral darkness and fearful corruption of the time cause the monk to believe that the cup of iniquity is full and the judgment day is nigh. "It is not a rhapsody on heaven; rather it is hot with the fires of hell," says Dr. S. M. Jackson. Bernard has no remedy to offer in this present life but he places full confidence in the life to come as a solution for all earth's ills. He prefaces the poem with St. John's words of admonition and hope, "Little children, it is the last time." This is the sentiment of the lines formerly printed in hymn books:

The world is very evil,
The times are waxing late;
Be sober and keep vigil;
The judge is at the gate.

And now we watch and struggle,
And now we live in hope,
And Zion in her anguish
With Babylon must cope.

The Judgment scene with which the satire opens depicts the doom of the wicked in contrast to the bliss of the righteous. In sonorous tones the devout monk denounces the wickedness of men which he attributes to the world in general. He attacks its vices with an outspokenness that makes long portions of the poem unfit for public reading. His language knows no restraint as he thunders against evil in every sphere of life. In flaming colors he portrays "the unnatural vices of men, the corruption of the clergy and of civil magis-

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trates, the prevalence of simony and the venality of the Roman curia. He is of the opinion that Horace, Cato, Persius, and Juvenal, all satirists of their own times, would be astonished if they visited the world in the flesh, and that Lucilius would call his own age golden in comparison with these latter days."¹

From the following lines one gets an appreciation of the fiery spirit of the writer who spares not even the head of the Church.

In holy Rome the only power is gold;
There all is bought—there everything is sold.
Because she is the very way to right,
There truth is perished by unholy sleight.
Even as the wheel turns, Rome to Evil turns,
Rome, that spreads fragrance as when incense burns.

Rome wrongs mankind, and teaches men the road
To flee far off from Righteousness' abode!
To seek for ruinous and disgraceful gain,
The pallium's self with simony to strain.
If aught you wish, be sure a goodly bribe
Will haste the sealing of the lingering scribe.
Rise! Follow! let your penny go before,
Seek boldly then the threshold; fear no more
That any stumbling-blocks will bar the way,
The Pope's own favor you can get for pay—
Without that help, 'tis best to keep away.²

Dante himself has not been more severe in his condemnation of such vices than has this writer.

True to his monkish ideals it seems Bernard cannot speak of the wickedness of women in language sufficiently strong. He recurs again and again to this subject, devoting many lines of the satire to it. He cannot ascribe enough vile adjectives to these creatures who embody all that is low and corrupt. His poem contains one of the fiercest arraignments of the sex ever written. Notice these sample lines,

est fera foemina, sunt sua crimina, sicut arena
foemina perfida, foemina foetida, foemina foetor.

The evils of wine, money, perjury, learning, and soothsaying all invoke his wrath. His pious voice cries out against these specific sins as well as against the general moral laxity of his age.

Although the portions of the hymn dealing with the particular evils of his time are valued historically, they have not seemed to have the universal appeal to be found in the more cheerful aspects of the poem.

II

The Universal Aspects of the Poem

Of the universal aspects of the poem, John Mason Neale says,

I have no hesitation in saying that I look upon these verses of Bernard as the most lovely in the same way that *Dies Irae* is the most sublime, and *Stabat Mater* the most pathetic of the medieval poems.

In contrast to the warning note in the opening lines of the satire, and in contrast to Bernard's conviction that *the world is very evil*, the reader finds sandwiched into the hymn incomparable expressions of sublime faith and confidence in Christ and in His ultimate triumph over sin; for the poet, while holding before the wicked the pains of hell, lingers to celebrate the glories of the Golden city of Syon, in verses of much beauty, full of elaborate mysticism so dear to the monastic mind. Very naturally the writer turns from his contempt of the world to sing the praises of the Christ and his heavenly fatherland.

Christ is acclaimed as the very center of the glory and joy of heaven.

Jesus the Gem of Beauty
True God and Man, they sing:
The never-failing Garden,
The ever-golden Ring:
The Door, the Pledge, the Husband,
The guardian of his Court:
The Day-star of Salvation,
The Porter and the Port.³

Even as today man's idea of heaven is colored by his circumstances in this earthly life, so to the recluse, Bernard, heaven is a city, a golden city, a city of mansions, a busy place in whose streets one may have intercourse with one's fellow-citizens; it is a place of abundant social joys. Blissfully he exclaims, "I know not, what social joys are there." He speaks of the "assembly of the saints," "the martyr throng," "the

¹F. J. E. Raby, *A History of Christian Latin Poetry*.

²(A. D. F. Randolph, publisher,) *The Seven Great Hymns of the Medieval Church*. p. 4.

³Translated by John Mason Neale.

shout of them that feast." Heaven to him represents the embodiment of all that he has renounced in this life. He who has been cut off from the noisesomeness of war finds expression for his martial spirit in the cry,

O Zion, summit of my hopes, brighter than gold
 art thou,
 The conqueror's laurel, ever fresh, shines on thy
 sacred brow;
 Angels and powers in phalanx bright
 Forever in their Lord delight.⁴

Thus by the devout monk is unfolded all that an opulent mind can picture of the magnificence and wealth of heaven in accordance with the glimpses in Revelation of its glory and happiness.

III

English Translations

In his *History and Use of Hymns and Hymn-tunes* David R. Breed says,

Of the seven great hymns of the church, some are truly *catholic*. They are cherished and sung by Christians the world over. Judged by this standard Bernard of Cluny holds highest place.

The two great authorities on the merit of the poem are Archbishop Trench and Dr. John Mason Neale. The former included about one hundred lines of the original in his *Sacred Latin Poetry*. Dr. Neale, the most successful translator of medieval hymns, was the first to translate any portion into English. Thus, after seven centuries of dormancy the genius of these two English scholars revived a portion of the hymn.

Dr. Neale felt that the highest value of his translation of the poem lay in its power to give consolation to the sick and dying. In a memoir published by Mr. Brownlow, entitled, *A Little Child Shall Lead Them*, he says that a child who was suffering agonies which the medical attendants declared to be almost unparalleled, would lie without a murmur or a motion while the whole four hundred lines of the Neale translation were being read.

In regard to the hymn tune, Dr. Neale wrote:

⁴Trench, *Sacred Latin Poetry*.

I have so often been asked to what tune the words of Bernard may be sung that I mention that of Mr. Ewing, the earliest of those written, the best known, and with children the most popular; no small proof, in my estimation, of the goodness of Church Music.

Most editors of hymn-books have agreed with this opinion.

Under the title *The Celestial Country* the poem heads the list of the Seven Great Hymns of the Medieval Church, which list includes *Dies Irae*, *Mater Speciosa*, *Stabat Mater*, *Veni Sanctus Spiritus*, *Veni Creator Spiritus*, *Vexilla Regis*, and the *Alleluatic Sequence*. Famous sections from the Neale translation have entered the hymnals of most religious bodies; the most famous, "Jerusalem the golden;" almost as popular, "Brief life is here our portion;" much loved, "For thee, O dear, dear country;" others, "The world is very evil;" and "Jerusalem the glorious." Brownlie's check of the twenty-four principal hymnals in use in England and America reveals one to four of these stately hymns in each. He says, "Several cantos of *Hora Novissima* rank and shall continue to rank with our best hymns." Adaptations of the Jerusalem hymns have been written and are also being sung by Christian congregations. Best known of these is the beautiful song of longing and hope, "O Mother dear, Jerusalem."

Stanzas of the hymn are found in many collections and anthologies of religious poetry as well as in the hymnals of many denominations. In a limited survey the writer of this paper found selections from the poem in some fifty volumes. A few of these contained almost the entire four hundred lines of the Neale translation. Dr. Eliot in his section of "Sacred Writings" in the *Harvard Classics* includes only ten Latin hymns; two of these are from *De Contemptu Mundi*. This should convince any unprejudiced mind of the literary merit of the poem. It cannot die because it treats of those problems which concern men of all ages: sin, brevity of life, punishment of the wicked, and reward of the righteous.